

# RAMIKEN

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When Repression Was a Muse  
By HOLLAND COTTER

Art in New York is going through a junk food phase.

And the New Museum, with a string of soft, chic, empty-calorie shows, was until recently part of the problem. But things seem to be changing there. An institution that started out scrappy and rough three decades ago is getting some of its grit back.

The latest evidence is “Ostalgia,” a group exhibition that fills all five floors of the museum with contemporary art from, and about, Russia and former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe.

A fair number of the artists are unfamiliar to New York; some have difficult, even harrowing histories. But a show that could have been a surveyish introduction to them is something more. It’s an extended essay about what happens when art and life meet, not because it’s a cool idea, but because they have no choice: they either join forces or lose everything.

The title is adopted from a 1990s German term that combines the words “east” and “nostalgia.” And all the work, including pieces from Western Europe, is a response either to the stresses of living under Soviet-style socialism or to the stresses of living without it after the Soviet Union dissolved.

There was an initial assumption in the West that the end of the cold war in 1991 brought universal jubilation. But time has proved and the show suggests otherwise. Free-market capitalism brought its suppressions and exclusions, as artists discovered. Among other things, some felt, it undermined the purpose and value of art.

Under Communism artists had limited professional opportunities. Those whose work didn’t adhere to state guidelines found no market. They had to support themselves with day jobs, doing whatever they could. If their art touched on hot-button political issues, it was censored, slapped down.

For some artists repression had a psychological upside. It gave their work a clear-cut sense of importance. It established art’s primary value as moral, not monetary; instrumental, not formal. If what you were doing was censorable, you could trust you were doing something right; heroic, even. And this attitude fostered solidarity and the growth of a counterculture in which experimentation, individuality and iconoclasm were protected and nurtured.

An influential group of dissident and nonconformist artists known as the Moscow Conceptualists set an example of such underground unity in the 1970s and ’80s. A few of these artists, like Ilya Kabakov, became international stars, but we encounter several less well-known members at the New Museum.

For all of them language, particularly the language of state-controlled propaganda, was both a target and tool. In large paintings Erik Bulatov gave ideologically loaded words a mock-monumental grandeur. Andrei Monastyrski, who founded the collaborative group Collective Actions, flew banners printed with absurdist phrases in and around Moscow, baiting censors but giving them nothing solid to latch onto. (Mr. Monastyrski, who represents Russia in the 2011 Venice Biennale, has a banner installed on Governors Island, on the side facing the Statue of Liberty, for the duration of the show. Created in 1977, it speaks in the voice of an outsider, who could be an immigrant: “I Do Not Complain About Anything and I Almost Like It Here, Although I Have Never Been Here Before and Know Nothing About This Place.”) Other artists in the group worked on a smaller scale.

Dmitri Prigov (1940-2007) used a typewriter and ballpoint pens to transform government news reports into visually scintillating concrete poems. His colleague Viktor Pivovarov, in a series of autobiographical text paintings called “A Project for a Lonely Man” (1975), charted the course of daily life, solitary but purposeful, in the underground.

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The underground took various forms. For some, like Mr. Monastyrski in Moscow, it existed in the public sphere. This was true also for the Czech artist Jiri Kovanda in Prague after the Soviet reoccupation in 1968. In the streets of a city under constant surveillance he executed series of brief performances consisting of barely perceptible disruptive gestures — he traced tiny images on a wall with his fingernails; he shed silent tears — that asserted his idiosyncratic presence in ways almost impossible to pin down.

Under the Soviet cultural system, photography had a kind of built-in invisibility because it wasn't considered art. That meant it wasn't exhibited much, but it wasn't closely monitored either, so artists could get away with a lot.

This leeway allowed Helga Paris to make her extraordinarily candid portraits of female factory workers in East Berlin, images that didn't conform to the ideal proletarian model. It permitted Nikolay Bakharev to shoot portraits of half-nude bathers on Russian beaches in defiance of an official ban on bared flesh. It gave Boris Mikhailov the chance to create his radical document of life under Communism as a picaresque vision of poverty, abject eroticism and social dysfunction. (Mr. Mikhailov has a concurrent solo show at the Museum of Modern Art.)

And then there's the underground that stayed behind closed doors. In his Bucharest apartment during the Ceausescu dictatorship the Romanian conceptualist Ion Grigorescu made self-punishing and gender-switching videos with himself as the only performer. (One piece, almost suicidally, was titled "Dialogue With Comrade Ceausescu.") In East Berlin the sculptor Hermann Glöckner (1889-1987) explored and refined an abstract style forbidden first under Nazi, then under Communist rule. This forced him to restrict his output to tabletop maquettes — pieced together from rubbish and easily hidden — for full-scale projects that could never be realized.

And Alexander Lobanov (1924-2003) lived in an underground that was kept under lock and key. Deaf and mute, he spent his life in a Russian psychiatric hospital producing meticulous colored drawings, many of them self-portraits in which he posed with Stalin, Lenin and an arsenal of guns.

All these artists were creating art from inside a condition of crisis, political, personal or both. Almost by necessity their work was focused on the present or the future. Artists who came to maturity late in the Soviet era had a somewhat different perspective. Many of them were faced with the aftermath of crises passed, battles fought.

Irina Botea is on the cusp of this divide. Born in Romania in 1970, she experienced dictatorship, the 1989 revolution and the rocky period of quasi-democracy that followed. In a 2006 video she restages televised scenes from the revolution, but revisits that emotionally charged event in a distanced way. For actors she chose American students who didn't speak Romanian and had to read the script phonetically, bumbling through a history they couldn't understand.

Other '70s-generation artists similarly look backward with what the writer Svetlana Boym has described as "reflective nostalgia," meaning critical, skeptical memory. Sergey Zarva paints directly on the covers of a popular Soviet-era magazine he remembers from childhood but makes the faces of dour politicians and smiling peasants look monstrous. In a dollhouse-size model of the cramped Romanian home she grew up in, Andra Ursuta depicts her childhood as a nightmare, haunted by a shapeless phantom molded from the soap that her parents produced for a living.

In a wrenching 1997 video called "After, After" Jasmila Zbanic, born in Sarajevo in 1974, documents the experiences of young children traumatized by the just-ended Serbian siege of the city. Other ethnic wars that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union also brought horrors. And it is interesting to see that the clearest instances of true nostalgia — a longing for a lost past — are found in work by the show's youngest artists, who were barely school age when the Soviet era ended.

Evgeny Antufiev, born in southern Siberia in 1986, projects himself imaginatively back to an ancient Russia of myth in his fetishistic dolls sewn from cloth and hair. Fake homemade bombs planted in the museum's elevators by David Ter-Oganyan suggest an effort to reinfuse art with a sense of radicalism, however desperate, that it has lost.

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And in an installation conceived for the exhibition, Petrit Halilaj, born in 1986 in Kosovo, creates a memorial to his own past. To make the piece Mr. Halilaj returned to the site of a natural history museum that he used to visit as a child, before he and his family became refugees from the Kosovo-Serbian War. The museum itself is now gone, replaced, in the relentless 21st-century erasures, by another building. But in city storage he found the old butterfly collection, still intact but moldering, and photographed it. The pictures, depicting what look like clods of earth with faint traces of wing patterns, are projected, one butterfly at a time, on the walls of an alcove off a staircase between the New Museum's third and fourth floors.

The show's two largest works are half a floor up, on four.

One is a towering 2005 sculpture by Thomas Schütte of three grotesque male figures swathed in blankets and peering malevolently in all directions. The other is Michael Schmidt's "U-NI-TY," a wrap-around band of fuzzy, ink-black, nihilistic-feeling photographs assembled from 1991 to 1994, the early years of German reunification. Both artists, if their work is taken as commentary on the Soviet bloc drama of two decades ago, give a pessimistic view of the history that has followed.

But their works are not alone in the gallery, and a third piece changes the mood, in a complicated way. In a sound installation by the British artist Susan Philipsz a woman's voice, high, sad and faint, periodically floats through the space, singing "The Internationale," the old Communist anthem, as if it were a hymn.

For a full account of the show's narrative threads there's a mural-size timeline on the fifth floor. It's beautifully done. But then, the whole exhibition — organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's associate director and director of exhibitions — looks, and sounds, terrific. This too is a relatively new development for this institution. I'd come to think that art just couldn't appear to advantage in its tall, blank galleries. But it can, and does.

At least the art in this show does. It also conveys a depth of thought and feeling that seems unavailable to most of what's in New York galleries right now. We too are in nostalgia mode at present, evident in countless variations on modernist painting in all kinds of flavors: figurative, abstract, expressionist, geometric. But it's market product, all desserts. By contrast, even the slightest work in "Ostalgia" feels grounded in realities larger than itself. The result is a meal for adults, and a quiet highlight of the year.